

\amoral\raskin.det (and see \amoral\hiroshima)
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"Self-Evident" Morality, Self-Righteousness and Dialog

It is easy, "self-evident," to advocate unilateral abolition if one rejects the morality or feasibility of deterrence (both nuc det and non-nuc det), as does Mark Raskin (and Peter Weiss).

Raskin was one of the earliest critics of deterrence theory, along with Art Waskow, when writing the "liberal papers" for Kastenmaier in the late-50s (?) and early 60's. (Their edited book of papers came out while Raskin was on the NSC; I think it led to his being forced to resign).

[Ask Raskin: What was his attitude toward the "missile gap"? How did he think, then, that we should deal with it? What would have been appropriate if he had, then, like most people, accepted the Cold War premises: Poliburo = Hitler, no negotiation reliable or appropriate, adequate inspection impossible...?]

As someone, I take it, who always rejected the notion of "deterrence" (?) Raskin has an unusually strong position for saying that something he believes is "self-evident" (since he himself never believed otherwise). He can also claim correctly that his position was generally regarded as self-evident, and absolute, during his lifetime (before 1942-45) and for a long time earlier (though see "exceptions").

Raskin says, like Weiss, that the deterrence argument always seemed to him like saying that since the Nazis had concentration camps (he means, I guess, extermination camps) "we had to have them too." (A very "prejudicial" analogy).

But the argument for the "self-evidence" of the argument against counter-terrorist threats tends to ignore (as Raskin does) that most (not all) of those who support deterrence, or counter-terrorism, do it as a special case under extraordinary historical (or hypothetical) circumstances: which were believed to maintain, on high national authority, during the two periods when the policy was openly supported: the Manhattan Project culminating in Hiroshima (two phases of justification: the Nazis, then the "need" for imminent invasion of Japan, their "refusal to surrender" (on any terms); and the bomber/missile gap.

I find that it offends and irritates me to have the plausibility of these two arguments for the "necessity," the "lesser evil", the consequential morality of deterrence summarily dismissed and stigmatized as sophistry, a limitation on my morality (as, by Weiss). If even I am offended and alienated by such a position, consider its effect on the mass of the audience, most of whom have always supported deterrence almost unquestioningly and

still do (as they accept the morality of Hiroshima).

There is some advantage in saying that a position is self-evidently moral, or immoral, if one feels that. It asserts the normative position clearly, strongly, and in an attention-getting, provocative way. It avoids suggesting that the difference in judgements with someone who thinks otherwise is unimportant, to be compromised or ignored, to be tolerated, not a moral matter but merely a difference in opinion, not strongly to be challenged (at the price of controversy, alienation, failure of coality).

But there is also a price of it. It amounts to saying that someone who denies a "self-evidently" moral or correct position, or who asserts a "self-evidently" [or read: "absolutely"] incorrect or immoral position, is either stupid or corrupt/immoral or lying, or some combination. This may be what one believes (though it is rather likely to be wrong, while it may be right). But it is certainly offensive, provocative, alienating. It is not an effective way to get oneself heard and paid attention to, to open and change minds, let alone to encourage cooperation.

It suggests insensitivity to or, more likely, ignorance of the experience, authoritative opinion (and consensus of peers), and special circumstances that the other feels underlies his different opinion, which is at odds with this "self-evident" truth. Indeed, any or all of these should be inferred when one runs into this sort of difference (when one sees something as "self-evident" oneself), not only self-serving moral or evidential blindness or deceit (though the latter are high on the list of inferences when one is dealing with an organization-man. Even there, one is getting "an organization position/line," not an individually-crafted stupidity).

Also, this inference may fail to give the skeptic himself credit for his insight, the grace or special experience or characteristics which make something that others fail to see, self-evident for him/her, or vice versa. Thus: How did Raskin manage to reject deterrence theory so easily in the late-50s? What was his attitude to Hiroshima at the time? To the missile gap? Weiss'? Falk?

I, of course, have no trouble being "sensitive" and empathetic and understanding of the public's openness to deterrence arguments; I accepted them myself (and to some extent, did so till quite recently). But I can still feel the power, the challenge, of their arguments when the discussion is narrowed to a particular situation with certain given premises, a static analysis with premises that are best to be regarded as hypothetical and have virtually always turned out to be wrong and deceitfully constructed. (See the debate over Saddam Hussein's biological warfare program and intentions and danger, and the possible counters to it).

To say simply that the nature of nuclear deterrent threats is such that there have been no conceivable past circumstances (no "might have beens") and no conceivable future circumstances that could justify such threats or preparations, is to charge that those who were persuaded by authoritative assertions that such circumstances actually existed or were imminent were simply immoral, morally obtuse, or best servile fools, morally culpable sheep.

This is not only insulting, it is not very realistic: as bad in its historical inference as in its consequences. This is especially so if the argument simply ignores what that authoritative mediation of popular experience (and elite/expert experience: see top secret estimates!) actually was! One needn't concede (if you're Raskin) that the case made was compelling, overwhelming, even "reasonable." But it's unrealistic, "foolish," biased, arrogant and insulting, as well as (therefore) unproductive to say that it "beneath considering, crazy, self-evidently immoral or wrongheaded." You're (he is) talking about a position that persuaded most Americans, both public and expert. I'm suggesting that it is both unpersuasive and essentially wrong, misleading, to call such a position "obviously, absolutely (i.e., under any conceivable circumstances) wrong."

Of course, the same could be said of the belief of the German people in anti-semitic racial ideology, or of most publics before World War I in the acceptability of going to general war. But perhaps the same conclusion is in order: look at the context, the prevailing ideology, the position of authorities, the consensus, before judging such beliefs to be, in effect, evidence of individual pathology or corruption or stupidity. It may indeed be, in fact, that a more appropriate lesson to draw, once more, is that individual intelligence and integrity is hardly any protection against "socially encouraged or shared beliefs" of practically any degree of stupidity, unrealism, or challenge to generally accepted and sound norms.

Imagine a discussion/conference, with people like: Raskin; Sheehan; Hersh; Langguth; Bird; Prados;

with the following ground rules:

1. For the people present, our expertise, concern, special information, experience, truth-seeking, is not in question; it is understood by all present; it need not be defended; it will not be attacked (this will be monitored for lapses).

2. Where there are differences of opinion, we will not defend the position, "this (my position, where this is controverted) is self-evident", though it is fine to say, "this seems self-evident to me," if we accept in all cases and demonstrate that we are prepared to change our minds.

3. We are prepared to change our minds, on any position we hold, not matter how central or long-held or published-by-use or generally held or "self-evident" it seems, no matter how much evidence we believe supports it. We will listen to, respectfully, counter-evidence and interpretations and arguments, and make a real effort to weigh it against our own evidence and interpretations. We will not simply reject it outright in our own minds, or in argument, or spend our time preparing our own expositions instead of listening to each other.

4. We will recognize that we share, like others, commitments to positions we have long held, that friends/allies hold, that we have published or expressed before, that support other beliefs or positions we hold and perhaps cherish. We are not, by this time in the generation-long debate, fully "open-minded" or "open to evidence and reasoning," any more than other humans are. We will make an effort to loosen and subvert these tendencies in ourselves, to cling to our present positions and understandings and to be deaf to others, in this particular company and discussion.

5. Given who we are and these "ground rules," which we will do our best to observe (helping each other by challenging apparent lapses from them, and being open to such challenge), we expect to learn from each other today, to change our minds. If any of us leaves without a single shift in understanding or position on any point, there has almost surely been a failure on someone's part (probably including that person's part) to observe these "rules" adequately. (I.e., a failure can take the form of provoking others into deafness and rigidity, as well as subsisting in those states oneself).

The challenge before us is: Can intellectuals like ourselves, with great background knowledge and long-term effort at understanding a complex problem, learn anything from each other (or

from anyone else, or events) or not? If not us, who? If not under these conditons, when?

(A reaction to my efforts to be heard on: my views of JFK's, policy, LBJ as of 1968, RMN. Or: FU threats; nuclear policy; the dangers of the arms race, of deliberate or "inadvertent" nuclear war...) Yet--and this may be part of my problem--I am perceived as having a "Cappy Ravenal problem." I must recognize and acknowledge this perception and change the reality, if I am to get others to listen.)

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See my arguments about JFK with Hersh, and Allen Smith, and Langguth, and Kai. About RMN, with Scheer/Stone,

About LBJ, with Dallek;

Likewise, imagine dialog with people like Bob Johnson: see my dialog with him yesterday at the CFR, after meeting with Peres.

Imagine saying:

1. Do you believe I was right, justified, in giving the PP to the Senate? (He didn't know I had!) To the press in 1971? (He was struck that the Senate didn't, after all, hold hearings or use Papers; even the PP.)

2. When it came to helping hold down US (and Vietnamese) casualties or to shortening the war:

(Whether by winning it, if you think that was possible, desirable, legitimate, or otherwise, by ending it!)

Do you think you considered everything you should have considered?

Do you think you did everything you should have done?

Do you think you did anything you should not have done?

3. The purpose of reflecting on these question is not to judge yourself, or encourage or help others to judge or condemn you (or praise you). Not to provide a basis for punishment.

It is to help others reflect on their own current and future (or past) choices, in similar situations, where they are (as you were) in a state of internal dissent from current policy. Especially where they foresee moral, political, human disaster from the official course, not just "error," a failure to achieve optimal results.

It is to help inspire them, or to learn from your experience, errors, failures, and your thoughts about these. Open yourself to learning painful lessons from your own experience, in the hopes of sparing others equal or more painful experience, inflicted or participated in by them or experienced by them.

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